DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 840 FL 014 202

AUTHOR Laychuk, J. L.
TITLE The Use of Etymology and Phonetic Symbols (Zhuyin Fuhao) in Teaching First Year Chinese.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (San Francisco, CA, November 24-26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Chinese; *Etymology; *Graphemes; *Phonetic Transcription; Pronunciation; *Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods; Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

The complex and subtle nature of Chinese requires an early understanding of the characters that extends beyond radical and phonetic identifications. Etymological explanations of character forms give students insight into the literary language, aid in character memorization and retention, and stimulate interest. Chinese presents special problems in communicating to students the standard of Chinese phonetics, but has the advantage that significantly fewer phonetic possibilities and modifications have to be mastered by comparison with Indo-European languages. Several systems for transliteration into Latin script exist, and "pinyin" most faithfully represents Chinese phonetic values. However, the phonetic symbol system used in China and Taiwan, despite its relative unfamiliarity to most Chinese language instructors, is a better device than any transliteration system for communicating standard Chinese pronunciation. The "Zhuyin Zimu" (phonetic alphabet) and "Zhuyin Fuhao" (phonetic symbols) are useful because: (1) they directly represent Chinese sounds without an alien alphabet; (2) their novelty to students avoids linguistic interference and allows greater standardization among students; (3) they are relatively simple, consisting of 37 symbols taught by groups in terms of points of articulation and followed by instruction in tones; and (4) the written transcription is accurate. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. L. Laychuk

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"THE USE OF ETYMOLOGY AND PHONETIC SYMBOLS (ZHÙYĪN FÚHAÒ) IN TEACHING FIRST YEAR CHINESE"

J. L. Laychuk
1983

ED240840

In my paper, in the interests of time, I will confine myself to a discussion of the teaching of Chinese phonetics with the aid of the Zhùyīn Fúhaò system (Phonetic Symbols) or, as it is also known, the Zhùyīn Zìmǔ (Phonetic Alphabet). Before turning to that topic, however, I will say a few words about the use of etymology as a legitimate tool in the teaching of first-year Chinese.

The complex and subtle nature of the Chinese language requires an early understanding of the characters that extends beyond mere radical and phonetic identifications. Etymological explanations of character forms not only give the student a fascinating and reasoned insight into the essence of the literary language, but also serve as an effective aid in the formidable task of character memorization and retention, and further stimulate his interest--an interest demonstrated by all students, those of non-Chinese background, as well as Cantonese-speaking students.

I will give just three examples to illustrate the usefulness of etymological analysis of characters to demonstrate its effectiveness in character learning. The character 杷 (bā) meaning "rake" is composed of clearly discernible radical and phonetic elements; the "tree" radical (木) denotes an object made of wood and the phonetic part indicates pronunciation. The primitive is written for the students and described in terms of its graphic representation, i.e. a tree with branches, trunk and roots, and a boa raised on its tail. It is further pointed out that the phonetic part is pronounced "ba" and also, to a

FL014202

lesser degree, "pa," which gives the students an approximate indication of the pronunciation of other characters with the same phonetic.

Another example: the character 室 meaning "house, home or household" contains the roof radical 宀 and phonetic "shi" (also pronounced "zhi" in other characters). The primitive clearly indicates how the meaning comes about; under the "roof" is a bird which bends its wings back and darts toward the earth (represented by the bottom line); thus, arrival (the reaching of one's destination) under a roof, i.e. a shelter where one finds lodgings, by extension: house or home or shelter.

The same phonetic constitutes an independent character, pronounced "zhi," and its meaning is "to reach" or "to go," following precisely the same etymological interpretation; in this case the entire character is both phonetic and radical--it is the "arrive" radical.

Finally, let us take the phonetic 生 "shēng" (also pronounced in some characters "xing"). By itself the character serves as both radical and phonetic; its primitive form represents a plant that grows out of the earth (the bottom line), with the additional middle stroke representing a whorl; its meanings--a plant that springs from the earth, to come forth, to bear or be born, and, by further extension, "new" or "strange." Further, with the "ox" radical (牲) the compound character, pronounced identically, means "draught animal," primitive , and with the "sun" radical written above (星), primitive , i.e. a heavenly body, it means "star" and is pronounced "xīng" (a change in the initial retroflex "sh" to palatal "x").

Thus, time spent on etymology is pedagogically legitimate, since the rate of progress later is accelerated, the essential "givens" of the

language become clearer and easier to grasp than before, and generally a thoughtful, inquiring and intellectual approach on the part of the student is the result.

Courses in first-year Chinese at The University of Calgary involve, as do courses in all of the other major foreign languages taught --Spanish, German, French and Russian--concentration on all four linguistic skills: reading, writing, speaking and aural, i.e. listening, comprehension. Unlike the Indo-European languages, however, whose writing systems practically reflect, in varying degrees, the pronunciation, the separation between the written word and spoken idiom of Chinese is qualitatively of a different order and as such represents a formidable obstacle to the instructors' attempts at communicating to the students the norm or standard of Chinese phonetics. Although Chinese lacks an alphabet in the sense in which that term is used for the Indo-European languages, the separation between written and spoken is, of course, not complete, because of the presence of recognizable phonetic complexes or components in characters which do give the learner some indication, albeit rather imprecise in most cases, of their actual pronunciation.

One distinct advantage to teaching Chinese pronunciation per se resides in the fact that one is confronted with significantly fewer phonetic possibilities and modifications that have to be mastered, as compared to those comprising the Indo-European languages. The traditional approach used in presenting Chinese phonetics in classes in Europe and North America has been to use one of the existing systems of transliteration into Latin script. The four main transliteration systems used--at least those with which I am most familiar--are the

following: the Wade or Wade-Giles system devised by Sir Thomas Wade in his Chinese reader of 1867 and modified by Professor H. A. Giles in 1892 and favoured by the English, some Americans and, especially, Overseas Chinese in their attempts to render an approximation of Chinese pronunciation to the Occidental; the Yale system, designed through the efforts of G. A. Kennedy of Yale University in 1943 and used mainly in the United States; the Luómǎzì (Romanization) system adopted by the Chinese Government in 1928 and incorporated into the official dictionary of 1932 and used to a degree in both China and particularly in Taiwan after 1949; and the pinyin system, the one officially approved for use in the People's Republic of China in February, 1958 (the product of five years of study on the part of an official commission established for that purpose) and increasingly being adopted by Asian Studies Departments on this continent. The Wade-Giles system, replete with four types of diacritical marks and with Arabic numbers indicating tones, suffers from a number of unusual and unsatisfactory orthographic representations which cause needless problems for the student. The Yale system, in my view, is both more rational and much more accurate in its rendering of the required Chinese sounds into English, especially for the non-specialist, i.e. the students, although one could suggest a few (minor) improvements. The Luómǎzì system, not widely used in the West, while attending to the problem of tones which are incorporated into the orthography, causes the final product to be unacceptably cumbersome and complex; moreover, phonetic inaccuracies characterize this system, but in this case, unlike in the Wade-Giles system, they appear to be caused not simply by unsatisfactory orthographic choices, but mainly and precisely

as a result of tones dictating phonetic representation. The pinyin system is perhaps the best in representing the norms of Chinese pronunciation, although it, too, has shortcomings. The latter would include, in particular the consonants "q" and "x," whose phonetic values in English are totally at odds with the required Chinese sounds; the consonants "z" and "c," which could more appropriately be written, as in the Yale system, "dz" and "ts," and the consonant "zh," which, again as in the Yale system, could be written "j," despite the apparent conflict with the palatal "j" of pinyin. With regard to the vowels, only the "e" represents any real problem, but its value can easily be demonstrated for the student; the value of the rounded frontal vowel "ü" is sufficiently known to students of French and German. In sum, then, with only five or six exceptions, the pinyin system faithfully represents the phonetic values of Chinese to the student.

Yet, it is my contention that the existing phonetic symbols system (alphabet) used in China and Taiwan is, despite its comparative unfamiliarity to many Chinese language instructors, the best device for communicating standard Chinese pronunciation to the student. This system avoids many of the pitfalls that beset, to greater or lesser degree, all of the transliteration systems described. The diverse mix of students in Chinese language classes immediately involves problems of perception. Latin letters to students from England, Germany, France, Canada, the United States and Hong Kong do not always represent, in phonetic terms, the same thing. Perceptions of distinct sounds and letters or combinations of letters used to evoke such sounds differ depending on the individual, his national origin, his education and the speaking habits to which he has become accustomed. Since the major

transliteration systems all use Latin letters, the problem of perception continues to exist. One of the solutions is to use a system that is not based on the Latin script, one in which there are no preconceptions in terms of phonetic requirements.

The Zhùyīn Zìmǔ (phonetic alphabet) or Zhùyīn Fúhào (phonetic symbols) system recommends itself as a tool in teaching Chinese phonetics for a number of reasons. The symbols directly represent uniquely Chinese sounds, without the necessity of passing through an intermediate stage involving an alien alphabet which in a number of cases and by necessity can only give a rough approximation of what is expected of the learner. One can as a result aspire to greater accuracy in mastering the Chinese sounds in using the phonetic symbols, as opposed to, as it were, attempting to force Chinese sounds into a rather rigid, basically non-Chinese framework.

Such a system has, too, a psychological advantage: the novelty of the system, when compared to the familiarity of any of the Romanization systems, wipes the slate clean, as it were, from the very beginning, and all students begin with the same conception of phonetic requirements, explained carefully by the instructor, whose pronunciation they are asked to reproduce; reference to Latin letters is consciously kept to a minimum in the interests of directing the student's attention to pronunciation per se, and avoiding the linguistic adulterations or interference that Romanization systems could cause. If such a practice is sustained throughout the course, theoretically all students, of whatever ethnic or social background, would end up with approximately the same standarized Chinese pronunciation.

A further advantage is the relative simplicity of the phonetic

alphabet. Thirty seven symbols (of the original forty) are taught--only eleven more than the number of letters in the English alphabet. These include the twenty one initials of Chinese (four labials, four dentals, three gutturals, three palatals, four retroflexes and three sibilants), and sixteen symbols rendering all the possibilities of Chinese finals (six vowels, five diphthongs, four nasals and the retroflex final). They are taught in a methodical way, i.e. by groups, in terms of point of articulation; in this way, such distinctions as between, for example, aspirated and non-aspirated consonants becomes clearer, and sound reproduction becomes more accurate. There are, of course, a few shortcomings, even in this system, in terms of rendering the actual sounds of some Chinese finals, e.g. -ong, -ian, -iong, and -ŭan, but they can easily be dealt with by the instructor. They number only four, since whenever such finals occur, preceded by any initial or independently (without an initial), they have exactly the same phonetic value. In any case, the conventional mode of transcription of Chinese sounds into the symbols is used, with no deviation from it, and the results have been encouraging.

Once the students have a good grasp of all Chinese sounds, the four tones are taught one by one, with extensive practice on each, first using monosyllables, and then disyllables (when tonal variations are explained and demonstrated). Tones are graphically represented in the conventional way: ¯, ˊ, ˇ, ˋ, which, in my view, is at once the simplest, most suggestive, and most logical (the neutral tone is represented by a tiny circle ° over the vocalic element of the syllable, or the tone mark is simply omitted altogether). I believe that such an indication of tones (used in textbooks from the PRC) is much preferable

to cluttering up texts with exponent figures showing tones, as is the case with the Wade-Giles transliteration system, and certainly more graphically represents variations in pitch than mere numbers do, and finally, I suspect, is no more costly in terms of publication.

A final advantage to the use of the phonetic alphabet is as a theoretical written check on both pronunciation (with tones indicated) and vocabulary. By assigning students on a regular basis sentences, paragraphs, or short texts to transcribe into the symbols (with required tones), one obtains a clear picture of their knowledge not only of vocabulary, but of the accuracy (in theory) of their pronunciation of words in the required tones. Such exercises enhance their awareness of uniquely Chinese sounds and are a reinforcement of knowledge acquired through practical (oral) exercises and readings done both in the classroom and language laboratory.

What is arguably lost in terms of the quantity of characters learned in the first year as a result of the emphasis placed on etymology and phonetics is more than compensated for in terms of the quality of both oral and written performance and a solid grounding in the theoretical and practical basics of the language.